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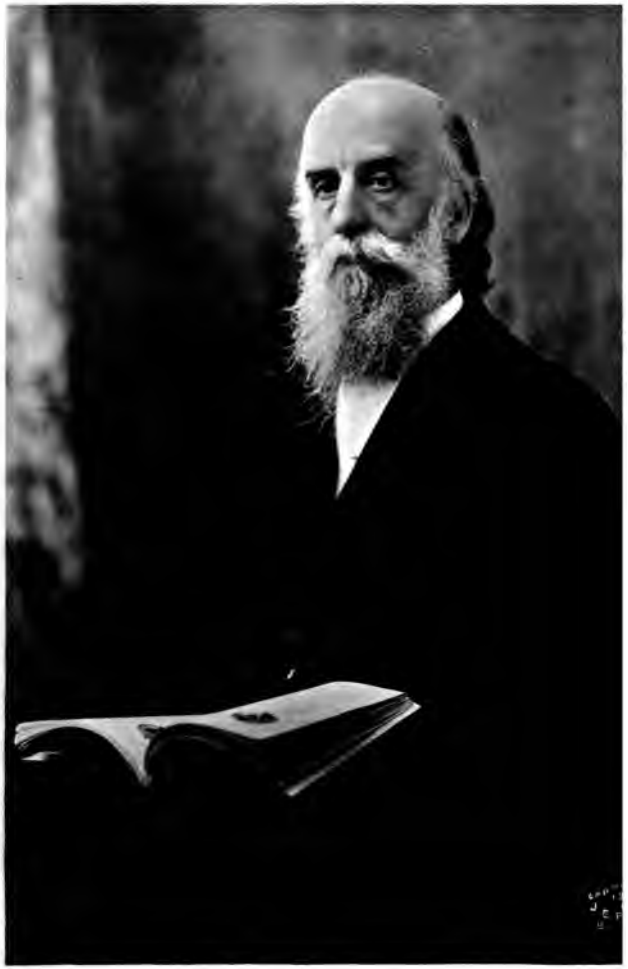
MY FOUR ANCHORS

WHAT WE KNOW IN THE REALM OF RELIGION



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WHAT WE KNOW IN THE REALM OF RELIGION

BY

REV. LYMAN ABBOTT, D.D.

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MY FOUR ANCHORS

For now we see in a mirror, darkly; but then
face to face: now I know in part; but
then shall I know even as also I have
been known. But now abideth
faith, hope, love, these three;
and the greatest of these
is love

—*1 Cor. XIII: 12, 13*

MY FOUR ANCHORS

WHAT WE KNOW IN THE REALM OF RELIGION

PAUL says of himself that he was perplexed, but not in despair. He had no complete and perfect system of theology. He says he had not, in this chapter. He says, "I know in fragments, and I prophesy in fragments." He had been brought up in one system of theology; he had undergone a revolution which transferred him into another system. He went away into the wilderness to work it out for himself; he never made a complete system of it. But amid all the perplexities and doubts that

beset him he held fast to this triple reality — the reality of faith, of hope, of love; the absolute assurance that we can look on the things that are unseen and eternal, the confidence that in every day there walks a better to-morrow, and we can help it walk; and the assurance of love, that one can do something for the neighbor at his side.

Temperamentally I am a skeptic; I cannot believe things on authority; I never have been able to. The intellectual processes of Cardinal Newman do not appeal to me. I must work out the problems for myself, or I must follow the working out of some one else. I cannot take the finished product of his thought and accept it because *he* has thought it out for me. Least of all can I do this in that which most concerns my character and my life.

A BOY'S SEARCH TOWARD GOD

I cannot remember the time when I did not wish to be a Christian. But to be a Christian meant to hold certain articles of faith incorporated in a creed, and I must therefore know what those articles were, and understand them. I set myself to that task. I began studying theology, I think, when I was about ten years old. I studied it with more or less diligence and more or less earnestness of purpose for seven years. Of course the study was a crude study; of course the mental processes were the mental processes of a boy. But they were sincere and earnest. At the end of that time I found myself no nearer certitude than at the beginning; I had neither found out that I did not believe in the customary theology nor that I did believe in it. I

gave up the process. I resolved to begin with the things I did know, and go on from those to the things that then I did not know. Of course that resolve was not distinctly and clearly and well defined, but looking back I can see that was the purpose which underlay the pretty radical and fairly instantaneous change in my method.

I graduated from college at the unconscionably early age of seventeen, knowing not quite as much as the average Freshman knows when he enters Harvard, I suppose; but, at any rate, I graduated, and when I graduated I also graduated from theology. I began with what I knew.

My mother had died when I was six or seven years old. I revered her memory as a Roman Catholic reveres the mem-

ory of the Virgin. Possibly I idealized her a little, though I do not think so; and for some years I thought a great deal more about what my mother in heaven thought about me than I did about what God thought about me. I revered my father. I knew he was a man of naturally irritable impulse, of quick temper, having a quick, strong, never a weak, gentle, easily pliable disposition; and yet I cannot remember that I ever heard him say a word that I thought he ought to have retracted. I wanted that power of self-control, I wanted the vigor, I wanted the manliness, and I wanted to hold it in curb, not to let it run away with me. I knew that was something I wanted.

I had an aunt who was a kind of second mother to me. Her husband, a minister, had left her in Maine to go and preach in

Pennsylvania. It was before the days of telegraphs. She heard of his sickness, started to Pennsylvania to nurse him, reached New York City, rang the door bell of her brother's house, asked for her brother, and the maid at the door told her, "He has gone to Pennsylvania to bury his brother-in-law." Widow, childless, she carried all through her life a singing, cheerful heart, and an unselfish service; and I wanted that — that power of cheerfulness in sorrow, that power of control under great pain, that power of womanly purity.

I said to myself: "These people are Christians; I want to find the secret of their power. I want to find how they get it. I want to learn where they have learned." And I began to study the life of Christ; I began to go to headquarters.

And I very soon came to the conclusion that I wanted to be like Christ, as these friends, and others of mine were like Christ.

At last I went to the conservative Presbyterian pastor of the church where I was attending, and told him my story. I said, "I do not understand theology, I do not understand the definition of the Trinity in your creed, but I want to be like Christ." And he said—and I wished then, and have often wished since, that ministers would be as ingenuous in the pulpit as out of it—"I do not understand the theology very well myself. If you want to be a Christ-like man, that is all we want of you." And he took me in.

MR. BEECHER'S INFLUENCE

Then I went to Brooklyn, and began attending Plymouth Church, where I heard Henry Ward Beecher. And Henry Ward Beecher — beyond any minister whom I have ever heard, or any minister whose sermons I have ever read — preached Jesus Christ; not theories about him, not speculations about him, but the story of his life. He did it so thoroughly that when he died, leaving his book on the "Life of Christ" unfinished, his sons were able to finish it by taking extracts from his sermons, which covered practically every episode in Christ's life except the crucifixion. Mr. Beecher had said: "I cannot preach on the crucifixion; I do not think I could control my emotions were I to try."

At the same time I began to teach the life of Christ. I did not know it very well, but I taught it that I might learn it. I took a Bible class in the Sunday-school and began to teach the life of Christ. And then the desire began to grow in me to tell other people about Christ, and other people about this life of love and service and sacrifice. I was a lawyer, and after resisting the impulse for two or three years I finally sold out my interest in my office, went to Maine, studied theology a little longer, just enough to pass a ministerial examination — that was not much — and then went to Terre Haute, Indiana, and almost the only book I took with me was my Alford's Greek Testament. I had not much money with which to buy a library; and it was almost confined to the books on my table. And

I organized a congregational class, held one evening in the week, to study the life of Christ, and so compelled myself to study it.

Presently I began to study the Epistles, because I wanted to find out how Christ was understood by the Apostles and those who were nearest to him. And a little later I began to study the Old Testament, because I wanted to find out the conditions under which Christ was brought up in his youth, and what were the underlying postulates in his mind. But I have been for nearly or quite sixty years the follower of one man, and I might almost say the interpreter of one book.

MORAL CERTAINTIES

There are some things we know, and, first of all, we know that goodness is better than wickedness, virtue is better than vice, uprightness is better than crookedness; no matter where the virtue may lead, no matter where the crookedness may lead. We know that if honor and truth and integrity led down to eternal hell it would be better to follow them than it would to follow vice, iniquity and selfishness, though they crowned us in an eternal heaven.

We do not know a great deal about heaven, we do not know a great deal about hell; but we do know that virtue is better than vice, goodness than wickedness. We know that character is, after all, the supreme end of living. If a man gets that and sacrifices everything else, he is

rich, and if he loses that and gains everything else he is poor. We do not always act upon that knowledge when we judge ourselves, but we always act upon it when we are judging others. Love of truth is the foundation of science; love of beauty is the foundation of art; love of goodness and virtue is the foundation of religion. That is the starting point.

In the second place, we know that we can choose the right and eschew the wrong; that we can choose for ourselves to be a Christ rather than a Crœsus, to be a Jesus rather than to be a Napoleon Bonaparte.

FREE WILL A REALITY

I have long since made up my mind that I will take no system of philosophy because it is simple, I will take no system of philosophy which sacrifices the truth in order to secure simplicity. We must have reality, we must face facts, and we must know what those facts are. And the theory of necessarianism does not face facts, does not recognize facts; it repudiates facts. Man is not a ball that is driven back and forth on the billiard table, man is not a physical machine wound up and set agoing. An ingenious clockmaker once made a clock and when the hour struck twelve a little figure came out and stood above the clock face and said to the man's wife, "I love you! I love you! I love you!" and then the man went off and left

the clock to court his wife. And she was not satisfied?

Why not? If man is a machine, why not the machine of a clock as well as the machine of a man? You and I know that we are not machines. In vain Hume tells us that no man is good enough to deserve more than a supper, no man bad enough to deserve more than a sound drubbing. When we read the story of the "white slave" traffic we do not believe the slayer of womanhood deserves nothing more than a good drubbing, and when we read the story of the four years of passion of Abraham Lincoln we do not believe that he deserves only a good supper. Man is not a machine.

I do not say that I can achieve all that Christ achieved, or be all that Christ was. No! What I say is this — you and I

know we can set that life before us as our ideal; we can aim for it, we can make it our purpose, we can choose whether we will take the good or the evil, the true or the false, the high or the low, the noble or the shameful. And we can make our fight for it. We may not win the battle, but we can make a good fight. We may stumble in the race, but we can get up and keep on. We may have our doubts, but we can be loyal. We can know that there is a difference between goodness and vice, and we can choose the goodness rather than the vice. And we can know this is goodness and this is truth as we see it in humanity about us. You can know it in a father, in a mother, in a patriot, in a martyr, in an honest merchant, in the neighbor at your side. And preeminently we can know it in Jesus of Nazareth.

THE SUPREMACY OF JESUS

Of all characters in history none so gathers into himself and reflects from himself all the varied virtues of a complete manhood as does Jesus of Nazareth. And the world is recognizing it. One of the best books of the life of Christ, interpreting better than any other in my library, I think, the Fourth Gospel, is Mozoomdhar's "Oriental Christ," written by one originally a Brahmin, and still not, I think, a professing Christian. In my library is a commentary on the Gospels written by a Brahmin who is still a Brahmin, but he recognizes the superlative character of this man. By its side is another commentary written by a modern Jew, a rabbi, on the Four Gospels, written to interpret the life and teachings of the greatest of Jews.

Let me turn to this chapter from which my text is taken:

"Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things."

That is Paul's description of love. Now, I will put the name of Jesus Christ where Paul has put "love," and read it again and see if there is any incongruity in the reading:

"Jesus Christ suffered long, and was kind; Jesus Christ envied not; Jesus Christ vaunted not himself, Jesus Christ was not puffed up, Jesus Christ did not

behave himself improperly, Jesus Christ did not seek his own, Jesus Christ was not easily provoked, Jesus Christ thought no evil; Jesus Christ rejoiced not in iniquity, but rejoiced in the truth; Jesus Christ beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things."

That is a character worth having, that is a life worth living. And that is what I mean by the divinity of Jesus Christ. There is not a great deal, now, of debate between Unitarians and Trinitarians. Unitarians avowedly put no great stress upon creeds, and as to Trinitarians, I venture to say there is not one in ten in a Trinitarian congregation that could give you an accurate definition of the Trinity.

But if you go back to the olden time and the old conflicts, the question was, "What is the relation of Jesus Christ to the Eternal?" Wars have been fought over the question, "Was he of one substance with the Father?" I do not know; I do not know of what substance the Father is; I do not know of what substance Jesus Christ is. What I do know is this — that when I look into the actual life that I know about, the men and women that are about me, the men and women in all the history of the past, of all the living beings that ever lived and walked the earth, there is no one that so fills my heart with reverence, with affection, with loyal love, with sincere desire to follow, as doth Jesus Christ. And when my neighbor sometimes says to me, "You

are looking, not at a real life, but at a life which the apostles idealized," I reply with John Stuart Mill: All the evidence shows they got their ideals from him, not he his ideals from them.

What is divine? What shall I reverence? I will not reverence power; the greater the power the worse the being if that power is used selfishly. I will not reverence wisdom; the greater the wisdom the worse the being if that wisdom is used to pull himself up and put others down. I will reverence unselfishness, I will reverence service, I will reverence love. And nowhere in all the history of the world is there such an embodiment of unselfishness and service and love and sacrifice as in the story of those Four Gospels.

So to me Jesus Christ is not only what Martineau has called him, "the realized

ideal of humanity"; he is the realization of my ideal of divinity. When I have given my imagination wings, when I have read poetry and prophecy and sacred books, and tried to picture to myself the supremest creature my imagination can create, it fades into darkness, as the stars fade before the rising sun, by the side of this real character that lived and loved and suffered and died. That I can know.

I do not need to decide whether he was born of a virgin. I do not need to decide whether he rose from the dead. I do not need to decide whether he made water into wine, or fed five thousand with two loaves and five little fishes. Take all that away, and still he stands the one transcendent figure toward whom the world has been steadily growing, and whom the world has not yet overtaken even in his teachings.

When he was here all controversies were settled by war, war between individual man and individual man, war between tribe and tribe, war between nation and nation. He said: "Try another method. If your neighbor has offended you, go to him and talk the thing over with him alone; if that does not do, take some one else; if that does not accomplish anything, tell the story to the ecclesia, the assembly, that is, to the representative of the community, and if that does nothing, leave him alone." And the world is moving in that direction. Going and telling it to him alone; that is diplomacy. Bringing in another nation and submitting the question to another nation for consideration; that is arbitration. Telling it to the whole world, and

letting them decide upon it; that is The Hague Tribunal. And by and by we shall learn that if he will not hear The Hague Tribunal we will not make war upon him, we will simply cut off all intercourse and see what he can do. Still Christ marches at the head of the procession.

When Christ was here, all sin was thought something to be punished, and the more cruel and bitter the punishment the better. "The remedy for evil," said the world, "is the deterrent power of fear, and the thing to be done is to adjust the penalty to the crime." Christ said: "No, you are mistaken. Sin is a disease. It is partly inherited, it is partly physical, it is partly intellectual, it is partly moral. What you have to do is to cure it, and the inspiration of faith and hope is a far better medicine than the deterrent power of fear.

I have come to seek and save that which was lost. The sick need a physician, not the whole." Now all the great leaders of criminology are leading us along toward that principle, that sin is a form of disease, and that the way to treat it is not by cruel punishment, but by inspiring human hopefulness and helpfulness. And still Christ marches at the head of the procession.

He found the world inspired by greed, grasping and grabbing, fighting with one another to see who should get the most out of this great heap of worldly possessions. And he said to them: "You are making a mistake. Not 'Blessed are the strong, for they shall get the most,' but 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the most.'" And it was only a year or two ago that one of the great multimillionaires of this country said to

me: "Mr. Abbott, a millionaire rarely laughs. We do not get our pleasure from what we possess, we get our pleasure from the service we render." And I think it was a Harvard professor that once said to me, "Pursue happiness and she flies from you; pursue duty, and happiness goes with you." And still the battle goes on between the motto, "He has succeeded who gets the most," and that other motto, "He who would be greatest among you, let him be servant of all." And still Christ marches at the head of the procession.

When he came there was no common bond of humanity; it was nation against nation, tribe against tribe, family against family. And into this country there has been poured every tongue and every tribe and every nationality, and almost every

race, and here we are. And Christ said, "All ye are brethren," and American democracy, catching that word from afar off, repeats it, though with bated breath and a half faith — "All ye are brethren." And still Christ with the banner of brotherhood marches at the head of the procession.

I do not know what is his metaphysical relation to the Infinite. I say it reverently — I do not care. I know for me he is the great Teacher; I know for me he is the great Leader whose work I want to do; and I know for me he is the great Personality whom I want to be like. That I know. Theology did not give that to me, and theology cannot get it away from me.

HELP READY AT HAND

And there is one other thing I know. I know that in this endeavor to carry out in life Christ's teaching, and maintain in my own individual life Christ's spirit, and grow by a gradual process of spiritual evolution into Christ's likeness, I can have help. I am not alone in the world. I can have help from men and women who are attempting the same task, who are marching in the same procession, who are attending the same school, who are striving after the same result. Their faith helps my faith, their hope inspires my hope, their love enriches my love. And I know that I can have this hope and help from those that have gone before. I can have it from the heroes and the martyrs and the teachers of all ages.

And I know that I can get it from the Bible. Not because it is an infallible book. I do not believe it is an infallible book; I do not believe an infallible book is a possible conception. An infallible book would mean, first, that Jehovah communicated the truth to the writers and that the writers were able infallibly to understand it; next, that they were able infallibly to utter it; next, that their utterance was infallibly preserved through all the changes of the ages; next, that it was infallibly translated by infallible translators; and, finally, and hardest of all to understand, is that you and I infallibly comprehend it.

No, that is not what the Bible is. The Bible is a book of great, splendid experiences that touch the whole gamut from the agnosticism of Job to the spiritual

experiences of Paul. I can find there a help, because I can find my own experience mirrored somewhere in its pages; and the way out, if the experiences are dark and sordid. And I know that I can find that help where those men found their help. I know that the same spirit that was in Christ in his lifetime is still in the world, helping men who want help. I do not surmise that, I do not take it on the experience of others. Matthew Arnold says, "There is a power not ourselves that makes for righteousness." And then he says, "How do you know?" He says, "Try it and find out; you will see it is so." I have tried it, and I have found out, and it is so.

So far as I can see, all men who think religiously believe it. They give it different names, but they believe it. What

I mean by the resurrection of Jesus Christ is really this — I do think the resurrection of Jesus Christ is perhaps the best attested fact of ancient history, or none better attested, but that is not the important thing. The important thing is that the same personality that was there, redeeming, cheering, inspiring, saving, is still in the world redeeming, cheering, inspiring, saving. Matthew Arnold calls it "a power not ourselves that makes for righteousness." The Quaker calls it "the Inner Light." The Christian calls it "the living Christ." The Jew calls it "Jehovah." Frederick Harrison calls it "the Spirit of Humanity." But we all believe in it, "call it God or what you like." Said Mazzini, "There is life which we have not created but which is given." I know it; you can know it.

FOUR ANCHORS

You remember in that story of the shipwreck of Paul he said that they threw out four anchors and waited for day. I have thrown out in my life those four anchors — my faith in goodness, my faith in the possibility of men's accomplishment of goodness, my faith in Jesus Christ as the ideal of goodness, and my faith in the divine helpfulness in the world to help me to goodness. And then I have waited for day. Not all is clear; the universe is still an enigma, there is a great deal I do not pretend to understand. But the changes that have taken place in the last hundred years have only deepened and enlarged my faith.

I know that God did not make this world in six days, or hang the sun and moon and stars about to light it. I know

this world is but a little globule of sand on an infinite beach of sand, and I a microscopic being on that globule of sand. And so the possibility of polytheism, and the possibility of idolatry — even the spiritual idolatry of a king robed in white and sitting on a throne somewhere in the universe — is gone. It never can return to me; I am glad it has gone. And in place of it has come this God who is *in* his world, not apart from it. I am an evolutionist. And evolution has taught me that life is a continuous growth; there was never a beginning to it so far as we know, there never will be an end to it so far as we know.

And many things that were mysterious to me I can at least leave mysterious. I am not in a finished temple, I am in a temple that is building. What the temple

will be when it is finished I do not know, but I can take my tool and do my little part of the carving, and leave the rest to him. And God is nearer to me, for every day is a creative day, and every hour is a redemptive hour, and he is in his world today as truly as he ever was in the olden times.

I am a democrat in every nerve of my body, in every globule of my blood. And what I mean by "democrat" is this — that God has made this world, not for a few privileged classes, rich and strong and wise, but for all his children; and his Kingdom will not come until all his children have something like a fair chance to make of themselves what they can in the world, and to have some share in its joys and in its prosperity. And I am setting myself with clearer and clearer

vision as the years go by to do what little I can to make this a world of universal humanity. I care less about preparing men for heaven hereafter, and more for bringing heaven to earth; less about singing, "Heaven is my home," and more about turning home into heaven.

And I believe — believe? oh, I am sure of it, sure of it — that there is One higher than the highest, and greater than the greatest, and wiser than the wisest, and better than the best, who is working out this world destiny. And I — I do the little I can do, and leave the rest to God.

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